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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS SEEK TO REVIVE "BOSTON GROUP"

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,  
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Five members of the National Assembly (NA) are seeking to establish an Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group with U.S. congresspersons, akin to the congressional relations they had cultivated via the informal "Boston Group." Foreign Policy Commission Chairman Saul Ortega and three other NA deputies met with the Ambassador January 9 to seek his support for their efforts to formalize such group in the next four months. They also noted that NA President Cilia Flores plans to seek a meeting in the United States with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Foreign Policy Commission Chairman Saul Ortega and National Assembly deputies Francisco Torrealba, Eleazar Nieves, and Juan Jose Molina met January 9 with the Ambassador, PolCounselor and Poloff in the Foreign Policy Commission conference room of the National Assembly office building. All four NA deputies plus Calixto Ortega (who could not attend the meeting) are trying to establish a U.S.-Venezuelan Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group. Saul Ortega praised previous contacts with U.S. congresspersons via the informal "Boston Group" He added that he, Torrealba, and Calixto Ortega (no relation to Saul) also had good meetings with a wide range of U.S. representatives in 2007.

¶3. (SBU) Torrealba said he will serve as the Venezuelan chairperson of the friendship group. He and a few other NA members plan to go to Washington probably in February and will seek meetings on the Hill and at State. Torrealba said he hopes that some U.S. congresspersons will travel to Caracas sometime in the next four months to launch the friendship group. In addition, recently re-elected NA President Cilia Flores will seek a separate meeting with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sometime in 2008. Ortega and Torrealba said they hoped the friendship group would facilitate more parliamentary visits and information exchanges. All four deputies expressed their personal interest in promoting improved bilateral relations, despite past "setbacks."

¶4. (C) Comment: After the opposition boycotted the 2005 parliamentary elections, U.S. congressional interest in the informal "Boston Group" diminished considerably. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV) mishandling of CODEL Hyde in 2005, President Chavez' 2006 UNGA speech, and President Chavez' rhetoric and efforts to construct "21st Century Socialism" have also likely contributed to waning U.S. congressional interest in visiting Venezuela. Only two U.S. congresspersons have visited Venezuela in the last 18

months. The friendship group members only half-jokingly noted that one of their members (Molina) is now in the opposition as he belongs to the Podemos party, a pro-Chavez party that campaigned against the constitutional referendum late last year. End Comment.

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